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In Search of the "Cup of Tea:" Intersections of Migration, Gender, and Marriage in Transitional China

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In Search of the "Cup of Tea:" Intersections of Migration, Gender, and Marriage in Transitional China

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Abstract

In Search of the "Cup of Tea:" Intersections of Migration, Gender, and Marriage in Transitional China

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Widely considered the world's largest migration, the ongoing rural-to-urban migration in China is unprecedented in terms of scale and impact. Millions of Chinese peasants flood to cities in waves to try their fortune. Among them, *dagongmei*, literally translated as "working sisters," who are single, young, and undereducated rural women working in cities, are believed to be one of the most marginalized communities. Their segregation and discrimination in the labor market has been well documented. As a major life event, their marriages have also received academic attention, but the marriage of *dagongmei* in current literature is generally considered a means towards achieving social advancement, often terminating their migratory trajectory. Few studies address the question of how physical mobility and economic independence alter the social relations of *dagongmei* in their pursuit of dating and potential spouses across the rural-urban divide. The separations of *dagongmei* from patriarchal families empower them, but their

legally classified rural citizenship and their lack of cultural and social capital constrain their aspirations. To closely examine how individual agency interacts with familial control and societal constraints, I conduct in-depth interviews with *dagongmei*, applying feminist standpoint theory, to hear their experiences concerning the social processes of mate selection. By situating marriage as a dynamic decision-making process, I identify three subgroups of women: independent seekers, resigned negotiators, and tradition reformers. My overall conclusion is that young rural women are empowered by their migration to pursue major life goals such as marriage, but traditional gender ideology still operates to confine their roles as daughters and wives in a transitional society with competing capitalist and socialist characteristics.

Keywords: *dagongmei* ("working sisters"), rural-to-urban migration; marriage; familial control; China; agency

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Introduction

This thesis examines how labor migration and economic independence empower female migrant workers over major life decisions such as marriage in transitional Chinese society. Specifically, I conceptualize marriage as a dynamic social process between individual agency and familial intervention and focus on how single migrant women working in the city negotiate their dating and marriage decisions with their rural families. This study contributes to the literature of disadvantaged rural migrant women in developing countries by intersecting marriage with migration and gender.

Across the world, the labor of young, single female workers has been deployed throughout the process of industrialization (Tilly and Scott 1987; Wolf 1992; Kung 1981; Salaff 1981). Academic attention paid to these women, most of whom are factory girls, tends to indicate that labor migration enables them to make certain life-course decisions but does not necessarily break their social ties with families at home. For instance, Diane Wolf (1992) suggests that factory girls have chances to improve their "productive investment" – marriage, and contends that factory girls pursue romantic free love. The Hong Kong factory girls studied by Janet Salaff (1981), however, indicate strong family ties as these girls shoulder burdensome family responsibilities. Their Taiwanese counterparts display a trend for delayed marriage to support their families as argued by Lydia Kung (1981).

A focus on Chinese female migrant workers and their marriages is particularly important in consideration of the massive ongoing migration in China. A 2009 survey by the National Bureau of Statistics of China shows that the total number of migrants in

China amounted to 229.78 million, among which women accounted for 34.9%. The survey also indicates that the percentage of unmarried migrants is 41.5%. Given the demographic composition of predominantly young adults in migration, the number of single female migrant workers is as high as 3.3 million if the 34.9% gender ratio remains unchanged in unmarried samples.

These single female migrant workers are widely known in China as *dagongmei*, literally translated as "working sisters." As portrayed by Hairong Yan in *New Masters, New Servants* (2008), *dagongmei* refer to young, single, and undereducated rural women working in cities. Mostly in their late teens and early twenties, *dagongmei* are disproportionally channeled into female dominated service or export-oriented industries and often clustered in shabby factory dorms, making their opportunities to socialize with men fairly limited (Pun 2005). Given the widespread marriage expectation, social pressure of and self-aspiration for marriage prevails among *dagongmei*. Their spatial separation from the natal family and the relative economic independence gained at the urban setting make the negotiation process of marriage increasingly complex.

Current literature tends to reduce the marriage of *dagongmei* as a means towards social advancement or a move that terminates their migratory trajectory (Fan 2002, Murphy 2002). According to researchers, *dagongmei* use marriage as an economic strategy to enhance their social status by marrying someone from geographically advantaged individuals (Tan and Short 2004, Fan and Huang 1998). A predominant view is that these women return to their villages, get married and stop migrating, contributing to their transience in the city (Murphy 2002). An attitudinal survey by Hongyan Liu,

however, shows that 80% of migrant women express wishes to pursue their own marriages (Zheng and Xie 2004). This confirms an emerging phenomenon that some migrant women choose relationships on their own in cities despite structural social constraints.

This study thus fills the academic gap of how mobility affects dating and marriage processes and outcomes. How do *dagongmei* pursue romantic relationships in the city and turn these relationships into marriages? How do their rural parents participate in the processes of marriage negotiations? To examine how migration affects marriage negotiations across the rural-urban boundaries, I follow the feminist standpoint theory to analyze how *dagongmei* pursue dating and choose spouses in the dichotomies of rural/urban and traditional/modern mores in a society undergoing rapid transformation.

Marriage is of particular importance in the Chinese context as it signifies the adulthood of both men and women (Young 1968). By analyzing the intersections of migration and marriage, I reveal how mobility affects marriage prospects, unravel the interworking of traditional familism and individual agency, and identify the social factors that direct *dagongmei* into different marriage outcomes across the rural-urban divide. Understanding this population's unique experience allows us to uncover how individual aspirations are enabled and constrained within macro and micro social structures.

This primary focus on migrant women in reform-era China is important for three reasons. First, traditional gender beliefs about women's roles in the domestic sphere has gained a firm hold within rural and urban society coinciding with China's rapid economic growth, despite the highly propagandized gender equality of Mao's era demonstrated by

the famous slogan "Women Hold up Half the Sky." (Wang 1999) During Mao's reign, the trope of gender equality was implemented top-down, and the rhetoric was women are as capable as men, if not better. One of the major critiques about this approach towards equality was that women's roles in the domestic sphere were ignored so instead of attaining equality, women added paid jobs to their traditionally ascribed housework (Xu 2000), much similar to the notion of a "second shift" (Hochschild 1989). In the reform era since 1978, however, women are assumed to be inferior to men in several occupations and suffer from severe discrimination in the labor market due to the absence of effective protection policies (Huang 1999). The marginalization of women in the public sphere and the implications for gender inequality, however, are complicated and blurred by a gender imbalance granting women greater agency in their pursuit of goals, particularly marriage. A shift to marriage negotiations within the framework of social constraints and women's agency, I argue, sheds light on gender inequality in China.

Second, China is increasingly urbanized, and considering the persistence of current regulatory mechanisms such as household registration, the ongoing rural-to-urban migration is expected to persist. It is imperative to examine how mobility affects marriage aspirations in the context of rapid urbanization and continued migration. By focusing on rural migrant women and their experiences, I unpack how gender ideology plays out in marriage encounters across the rural-urban boundary in the current economic modernization drive. I would also like to explore how macro and micro social structures constrain rural migrant women's choices and uncover the mechanisms underlying the persistence of institutionalized marriage in China.

Third, traditional gender ideology continues to dictate women's asexual sexuality. Women are by no means encouraged by social norms to pursue their sexuality. My impression is that the discourse of sexuality in China upholds and testifies the "repressive hypothesis" as critiqued by Foucault (Foucault 1976). In the modernization agenda of a transitional Chinese society, freedom to choose one's spouse is associated with modernity and encouraged by the dominant discourse. At the same time, however, media depictions of materialistic rural girls who become mistresses and give birth to illegitimate children abound, taking away women's agency. Still, sex is considered private and is by no means encouraged premaritally (Yuen et. al 2004). A careful examination of migrant women's dating patterns reveals the previously shunned sexual dimension of single women's lives. Studying independent dating in urban settings also allows me to analyze how traditional familism and individual agency operate together to shape gendered individuals.

As a case study of women's agency over major life events such as marriage in the Chinese context, I present and analyze different patterns of marriage outcomes and aspirations. What interests me is how *dagongmei*, mostly Chinese factory girls, choose their spouses and cope with parental interference in the mate-selection process. Specifically, I focus on marriage, as a social process, to examine the changed social relations between daughters and their parents in response to young women's labor migration and physical separation from home. My research clearly reveals that some women are independently seeking their own spouses whereas others eventually succumb to parental wishes. I term these two groups independent seekers and resigned negotiators. A third group does not attempt to find spouses on their own in cities, but they demand

changes to the traditionally arranged marriages. I call them tradition reformers. All women embark upon their migration with factories but differ in their negotiation of marriage with parents stationed in rural areas. My conclusion is that young rural women are empowered by their migration to pursue life goals, but traditional gender ideology still operates to confine their roles as daughters and wives across the rural-urban divide in a transitional society with competing capitalist and socialist characteristics.

Literature Review

MARRIAGE MIGRATION

Although gender has become an analytical unit in migration studies with the proliferation of the feminist movement, women and women's migration experiences remain underrepresented (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000). Compared with labor migration, marriage migration receives far less attention (Fan and Li 2002; Watts 1984). Within the scope of marriage migration, international marriage migration is being studied more than domestic marriage migration (Fan and Li 2002). Despite its historical and continued significance for women, marriage is preponderantly mentioned as a life-course event and rarely given primary focus in migration literature. Marriage is described as a life event triggering migration (Mulder and Wagner 1993) or a status that is used to explain mobility (Speare and Goldscheider 1987). In more recent studies, marriage is conceptualized as an economic strategy and a means towards social advancement (Fan and Huang 1998; Fan and Li 2002; Davin 2008). In fact, the definition of marriage migration provided by Fan and Li (2002), states that "migration to join the spouse in another area usually at or soon after marriage," belying the dependence relations that women are assumed to bear.

A significant gap in the marriage migration literature is regarding the impact of migration upon marriage aspirations and outcomes. The economic dependence gained through migration empowers young single women, thereby constituting them as active agents in migration (Jacka 2006). Rarely explored is how such agency plays out in dating and marriage encounters in the context of migration. Are migrant women considered the

same as local women in the marriage market? How do single migrant women perceive and pursue marriage at their places of destination? Contrary to mainstream literature on marriage migration putting marriage before migration, I examine how women's individual mobility affects dating and marriage prospects to fill the literature gap. Before I delve into how migration affects marriage aspirations and outcomes in the Chinese context, an overview of the unique characteristics about Chinese migration seems mandatory.

THE CASE OF CHINA

One major boundary between rural and urban China is the *hukou* (household registration) system. To tightly control the movement of people between urban and rural areas, the Chinese government introduced the *hukou* system in 1958. Within the system, individuals are legally categorized as "rural" or "urban" citizens, who have been traditionally expected to assume "agricultural" and "nonagricultural" jobs respectively (Wu and Treiman 2004). "Rural" residents were not allowed to work or live in urban settings unless approved by their work units (Solinger 1999). Since the reform in the late 1970s, the labor of rural citizens is demanded in cities but these migrants are not granted the entitlements of permanent city residents (Roberts 1997, Solinger 1999). Their rural status remains unchanged despite their employment in cities. The transformation of one's status from rural to urban is achievable only through education and party membership (Wu and Treiman 2004). Without sufficient education or party affiliations, rural Chinese migrants retain their lower ranked classification as rural residents, even if they move and work in the city. This urban classification clearly marks the migrant as an outsider

predisposing them to discrimination and prejudice in the workplace and deprives them of labor rights and benefits enjoyed by urban classified workers (Wu and Treiman 2004).

A reason to retain a rural classification, however, is that it comes with land possession, which must be forfeited if an urban classification is pursued. This land ownership is a hook, tying rural migrants to their status in a circular position of lower position and lower opportunity. Lacking education, the rural worker chooses to retain their asset of land possession as a security measure in case urban opportunities decline. It is this same lack of education that is key in preventing rural immigrants from attaining urban status. As scholars have pointed out, the system is currently partially implemented but continues to confine migrants as "rural" and to sustain the "circulatory" nature of Chinese migration (Xu 2002, Roberts 2002). In many cases, Chinese migrants are compared to illegal immigrants and their marginalization in industrialized countries, highlighting the hostility and unfavorable employment conditions the migrants experience as well as their distant hopes of eventual settlement in the destination area (Jacka 2006, Roberts 1997).

The highly skewed male to female gender ratio, particularly in rural China, should also be noted (Zhou et al 2011). Due to traditional Confucius ideologies and practical old-age caregiving concerns for elder family members, the preference for sons still prevails in rural areas, exacerbating the gender imbalance. While it is not the focus of my study to examine how this relative scarcity of women in the marriage market affects their choices in mate selection, it can be expected that women gain more autonomy, due to their scarcity, during the negotiation process. This autonomy, however, may be mediated

by strong family control. With the implementation of the one-child policy, a rural family is typically allowed a second chance if the first born is a daughter. The most direct effect is the decline in the number of children at a family. Concerned by old-age support, parents often try to marry their daughters to nearby villagers (Murphy 2002). This is the larger socio-demographic context where this study is situated. Understanding this social context is fundamental in examining how *dagongmei* negotiate their dating and marriages across the rural-urban divide.

MARRIAGE IN CHINA

Arranged VS Free Choice Marriage

Social institutions such as marriage have undergone major transformations together with China's political and economic changes in the twentieth century. Traditionally, daughters stayed at home and waited for their parents' solicitation from and consent to a man's proposal. In many cases, young couples did not even have a chance to meet before their marriage ceremonies. Freedman (1967), for instance, argues for a single basic model of marriage practices during the Republican period (1911-1949) in China, that is, paternal determination. Daughters during that time took husbands nominated and arranged by parents, who shouldered the primary responsibility in marriage negotiation and conclusion. This type of arranged marriage prevailed and was the norm.

The Marriage Law introduced in 1950, immediately after the founding of the People's Republic of China, however, rejected arranged marriage and espoused free-choice marriage. Individuals were granted legal rights to pursue their own spouses, but

the practice of free-choice has never been universally applied, particularly not in rural areas (Croll 1981). Instead, marriage practices fell somehow in between arranged and free-choice. Most marriages in rural China were initiated by a go-between and had to be agreed upon by parents on both sides (Croll 1981). In most cases, however, young people were allowed to meet before engagement and their options to say No were listened to and understood, thus modifying arranged marriages. With the economic reform and opening-up since 1978, however, Chinese women's mobility has been on an all-time increase. Examining single women's decision-making of marriage in this reform era thus offers us insights into how social institutions change in response to social contexts.

It is understood that free-choice marriage generally follows romantic love. In this thesis, I conceptualize romantic love and independent spouse searching as greater agency exerted by individuals. My intention is to find out how *dagongmei* navigate family relations with parents during the decision-making process of marriage. One of my clear inclinations is to highlight free and independent pursuit of spouses.

It should be noted, however, that free love has been existing in rural China. Young men and women in the same village had chances to mingle when their social contact was largely constricted to their villages. Affections did thrive in some cases. Such dates were often hidden from parents at the beginning. Couples in love, eventually, still needed to approach a match-maker to publicize their relationship and assist in concluding marriage negotiations. Some parents might agree to the match and others might simply block the negotiation. This independent pursuit staged in rural areas, however, seems to be on the decline as most young women and men started to work in cities. People left in

the village are increasingly the old and the young. China Daily, the state English press, reported in 2010 that "More than 16.32 million old people were left behind with young children in rural areas."

Rural-Urban Differences

A word about urban love is necessary. Urban young people have more chances to mingle with other people and have been encouraged to pursue their own spouses. A recent phenomenon, however, is that some people in the city cannot find matched partners on their own. As far as I observe, urban parents strategically deploy their social networks to match their children at marriageable ages to suitable prospective spouses. In many cases, this project may even go beyond the household level. Honig & Hershatter (1988), for instance, argue that marriage is a community affair in China. They track that some large companies, particularly large state-owned enterprises, establish their own divisions to create activities for young people to socialize, although with limited success in terms of marriages. In big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, lots of matching fairs are organized. To the present, dating websites such as jiayuan.com have been launched to match people with their desired partners. These thriving match-up services tend to be tailored to urban young people.

Given their presence at the lower-end of the labor market, migrant workers hardly have any access to such socialization opportunities and services. Displaced young migrant workers of prime age to marry are confronted with additional social barriers while seeking both work and marriage. Marginalized due to their legally specified rural status by the *hukou* system, migrant workers are not treated as equals to urban residents

and are thereby generally deprived of social pensions when they move to the cities. Female migrant workers, in particular, are stigmatized because of their poor education status and their socially considered lower quality (*di suzhi*) and lack of cultural taste (*mei pinwei*) (Jacka 2006). In addition, they are subject to the implicit and explicit ongoing surveillance of their sexuality, traditionally a key virtue of womanhood, by rural families through extended kinship networks (Lee 1996). Most female migrant workers live in factory dormitories or clustered cheap housing in the peripheral of cities. As depicted in the news and observed through ethnographic studies, most migrant women eventually are compelled to move back to their villages and to meet potential spouses arranged by match-makers (Fan 2002, Murphy 2002).

Another group of rural-to-urban migrants, who have formal college education, mostly have their *hukou* changed into urban and are thus considered urban. But they often lack social support in the city and thus comprise a huge proportion of the currently so-called "ant tribes[1]" in the city (Lian 2009). News stories about "phoenix men" or "phoenix women" marrying their city peers abound, highlighting rural-urban differences in social values and habits. It is not the focus of this thesis to elaborate their experiences.

Parental Control

The study of marriage practices in China has been situated within the framework of familial interests and individual preferences (Croll 1981; Yuen et. al 2004; Lavely 1991). Marriage negotiations, in this sense, constitute interactive social processes between

[1] Ant tribe is a neologism used to describe low income college graduates who settle for a poverty-level existence in the cities of China. Most of these graduates are from rural area. They make meager incomes in the city and often live in cramped areas in the suburbs.

individual agency and social constraints as represented by families. For instance, Croll (1981) reveals the dominance and control over marriageable children through dependence relations within the family sphere and highlights family as a central site for studying marriage practices. Likewise, Lina Song (1999) argues that marriage in rural areas is a household strategy rather than an individual project.

As early as the 1960s, William Goode (1963) predicted that free-choice marriage would become the trend with the process of industrial development and urbanization in China. He locates the study of marriage patterns in the framework of economic development and family type. In this manner, Goode contends that social relations at the individual and familial levels vary with the macro social context. By linking marriage to overall social development, Goode develops the theoretical framework that enables me to closely study how individuals are both enabled and constrained by different levels of social structures. Following this vein, it is important to understand the varied marriage aspirations and experiences of female migrant workers who already disrupted their social relations by relocating to cities. It is also imperative to trace the changes in the qualities of desirable partners and identify the social relations that underlie current marriage negotiations with rapid economic development in China.

Still, the process of how marriage is initiated and concluded in the context of migration remains unexplored. As Louise Beynon (2004) observes, many rural women embark upon their migratory journey simply to evade early arranged marriages and the subsequent expectation of motherhood. With the advancement of age, however, these same women are trapped lacking a place of belonging in either a rural or urban setting

leading to anxiousness about their marriage opportunities. This concern over marriage, according to Beynon, is "…more than finding a partner; it is securing a future place" (Gaetano and Jacka 2004, p136). To continue this thread, I review first how migration intersects with marriage in transitional China.

MARRIAGE MIGRATION IN CHINA

Marriage migration has largely been ignored, although the exogamous nature of female marriage is a well-established social fact (Wang 2000). Female migration, in this sense, has been "an expression of the patrilineal, virilocal nature of Chinese society" (Wang 2000, p231). Fan and Li (2002) also claim that marriage has been the leading cause for women to migrate.

The marriage of female migrant workers, however, is generally depicted as a termination point in their migration trajectory (Murphy 2002, Xu 2002). Migration thus comprises an episode of rural women's life between school and marriage (Fan 2004). Due to the social and cultural undesirability of rural women for city men, a migrant woman often feels compelled to marry a husband from her original region, returning to village, whereas her husband continues to migrate for work opportunities (Fan 2003). This stereotypical circular route for women migrants has been debunked by Roberts (2002). Based on the demographic and occupational characteristics of 9,124 women, he shows that many married women migrate with their husbands and may manage to be the vanguard in a transition to permanent settlement in Shanghai. In this manner, Roberts demonstrates the continued migration of married women, indicating married women's pursuit to cities.

One marriage practice that merits particular attention in the context of migration is hypergamy, or marrying up. It has been upheld as one of the few means of upward social mobility for women in China and believed to be an economic strategy for women to alleviate poverty and achieve higher social status (Wang 2000). Chinese women are believed to prefer spouses that have preferable attributes such as tallness, stronger educational background, and better financial means. For instance, Croll (1981) notes the avid aspirations of rural women to marry into city families and claims that marriage is a decision-making process based primarily on the political and social status of potential spouses in the Mao era. With migration, certain forms of spatial hypergamy are indeed achievable. Fan and Huang (1998) predict that there will be more and more long-distance inter-provincial marriages because of migration. The institution of marriage, according to Fan and Huang, functions as a viable option for economic and social upward mobility for women in economically disadvantaged regions. Marriage, in this sense, is a means towards the goal of spatial advancement.

With their economic independence gained through urban employment, *dagongmei* tend to have high aspirations for marriage but are still, generally considered undesirable as wives to city men. Apart from their already undesirable rural *hukou* status, *dagongmei* are also generally undereducated attaining only junior school or high school certificates (Lee 1996, Ngai 2005). Their gender-segregated employment and clustering in factory dorms limit their opportunities to meet potential spouses (Xu 2002, Ngai 2004). In general, rural migrant women are discriminated against and almost always excluded from the urban marriage market (Davin 2008). City men who are willing to be matched with

rural women are generally old, poor, or mentally and physically handicapped (Tan and Short 2004).

The marriage negotiations of *dagongmei* across the rural-urban divide hence provide a platform for examining how individual agency interacts with familial control and social constraints. In a quest to view marriage as a foreground for rural migrant women to pursue goals in their lives, I study how migration affects the dynamics of marriage initiation and conclusion. I am also interested in understanding and disclosing how mobility and a lack of parental surveillance covertly change the perceptions of sexuality. A focus on *dagongmei*'s dating and marriage experiences allows me to discern how social relations are altered within the context of migration. As Marion Levy (1949) notes, the mobile young who lost contact with families for a prolonged period of time are more or less coerced into the situation, which he terms as "individualism by default" rather than "individualism by ideal" (Levy 1949, p332). The emergence of new behaviors, as argued by Levy, is attributed to the changes in the socio-economic context of industrialization and planning of the state. Changes in social relations, in this sense, are explained within the framework of development and the state. It is thus reasonable to expect that dating and marriage behaviors vary with China's rapid transformation.

In an era of emerging industrialization and urbanization, do *dagongmei* still perceive marriage as a final stage of their city-working lives? In their gap between work and married life, how do rural migrant women make sense of their experience across the rural-urban divide? How do they perceive and pursue relationships and shop for spouses? Why does marriage continue to play an important role and what does marriage mean for

migrant women? How do their parents in rural areas influence and control the spouse-searching process? What are the different social factors at work to direct rural migrant women into different marriage paths?

HOES DOES MOBILITY AFFECT MARRIAGE PROSPECTS AND OUTCOMES?

One early attempt to address how mobility affects marriage practices is a study by Lin Tan and Susan E. Short (2004). Based on in-person interviews and focus groups, they position marriage as a transactional process based on the evaluation of personal and family factors. In particular, they show that *dagongmei* actively seek marriage as a way to eliminate their outsider status and actively attempt to integrate into the receiving area. This research grants agency to these female migrant workers but presents a skewed depiction of *dagongmei* by limiting this social group to only those marrying into the destination area.

Apart from those *dagongmei* who marry into the destination area, I also examine how some *dagongmei*, who succumb to parental expectations of migrating back to rural areas, understand and anticipate their choices and constraints during the decision-making process. In addition, another subgroup of *dagongmei* pursue spouses on their own, most likely with a rural male who has also found his way to the city, managing to stay in the city by taking advantage of upwardly mobile opportunities. By incorporating the diversified marriage paths of *dagongmei*, I can dismantle the monolithic view of migrant women and probe into the filial/rebellious daughter model formulated by Yuen-fong Woon (2000), or in Arianne M. Gaetano's term, "filial daughter" and "modern women." By so doing, I can uncover the social factors that lead *dagongmei* to different marriage

outcomes. Linking their mate selection process to mobility allows me to closely examine the interactions between individual agency and social constraints.

To summarize, previous research presents marriage as an economic strategy or a termination marker for *dagongmei*'s migration. What goes unnoticed is the dynamic ongoing social process of individual agency and parental control. My specific research questions are therefore the following:

1. How does migration affect the agency of rural migrant women in their pursuit of a spouse given the historical legacy of arranged marriage and parental control? How is marriage as a decision-making process perceived and pursued by young migrant women?
2. What are the different social factors at work to channel some *dagongmei* into arranged marriages and others into independent dating?
3. How are marriage negotiations tied to gender inequality in the reform era with its rigorous economic growth?

By situating marriage and dating as dynamic and interactive social processes, I am interested in analyzing and revealing the gender dynamics in the dualisms of rural-urban and familial-individual mores and probe into the implicit discourse of sexuality. My primary goal is to understand how rural migrant women make sense of their lives and pursue major life goals in a transitional Chinese society.

Research Site and Methodology

GEOGRAPHICAL SHIFT

Most studies on Chinese migration focus on the Pearl River Delta, the most developed economic region in China, highlighted in blue in the following diagram. Other large net out-migration provinces such as Anhui and Sichuan are also touched upon in recent literature. In my project, the geographic site shifts to my home province, Shandong. As the cradle of Confucianism, Shandong has been a traditional site for social inquiries. Apart from the anthropological inquiry by Martin Yang mentioned earlier, sociologist C.K. Yang started his pioneering work of a marketing community in Zouping, in the middle of Qingdao and the provincial capital, Jinan. Lately, Zouping has been chosen again by sociologist Andrew Walder to reveal the role of county government in the process of institutional change in China.

Figure 1: Map of China

The specific site of my study is Qingdao, one of the most renowned coastal cities, attracting both tourists and direct foreign investments. As the largest in-migration city in the province, Qingdao, highlighted in red, seems a perfect site for a study on the intersections of migration, gender and marriage. Thanks to its favorable location and booming export-oriented business, Qingdao has achieved fame by housing the headquarters of such Chinese Multinational Corporations (MNCs) as Hai'er and Qingdao Brewery. It has also established itself as a famous tourist destination. Located in the south of Shandong Peninsula, Qingdao faces the Republic of Korea and Japan to the east in the sea. It covers a total area of 10,654 square kilometers; of which 1,159 square kilometers are urban. Qingdao was designated by the Chinese government among China's 15

economic center cities in 1981 and among China's 14 coastal open cities in 1984. In 1986, Qingdao was listed as one of the five cities specifically designated by state planning and granted with provincial level authority over economic administration. According to the 2006 statistics released by the Public Security Bureau of Qingdao, the total number of in-migrant workers exceeded 1.3 million and the annual rate in the past few years had been maintained at 15% to 20%.

FIELD INTERVIEWS

By following the "outsider-within" perspective formulated by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), I deployed my optimal status as a rural-to-urban Chinese to inquire into the lives and pursuits of migrant women as they move from rural villages to urban cities in China. To reduce the distance, I intentionally spoke my local dialect during the interviews. In addition, the methodology of autoethnography developed by Nancy Naples granted me a rational utilization of my personal observations in this multifocal research. By using participant observation, I closely examined how parents in the rural setting, mothers in particular, are actively involved in the matching process of daughters. These mothers implicitly ask relatives or neighbors to initiate negotiations with young men with outstanding personal attributes or from rich families, urge and accompany their daughters to meetings arranged by matchmakers.

With the help of my cousin's wife, a migrant, I conducted 19 interviews with migrant workers, including 17 female and 2 male. The majority had attended or finished junior middle school; 2 simply finished primary school; 1 completed senior technical

school but did not pay for a certificate. All of them had brothers or sisters. Their average age is 25.6 years. Figure 2 lists their marriage status.

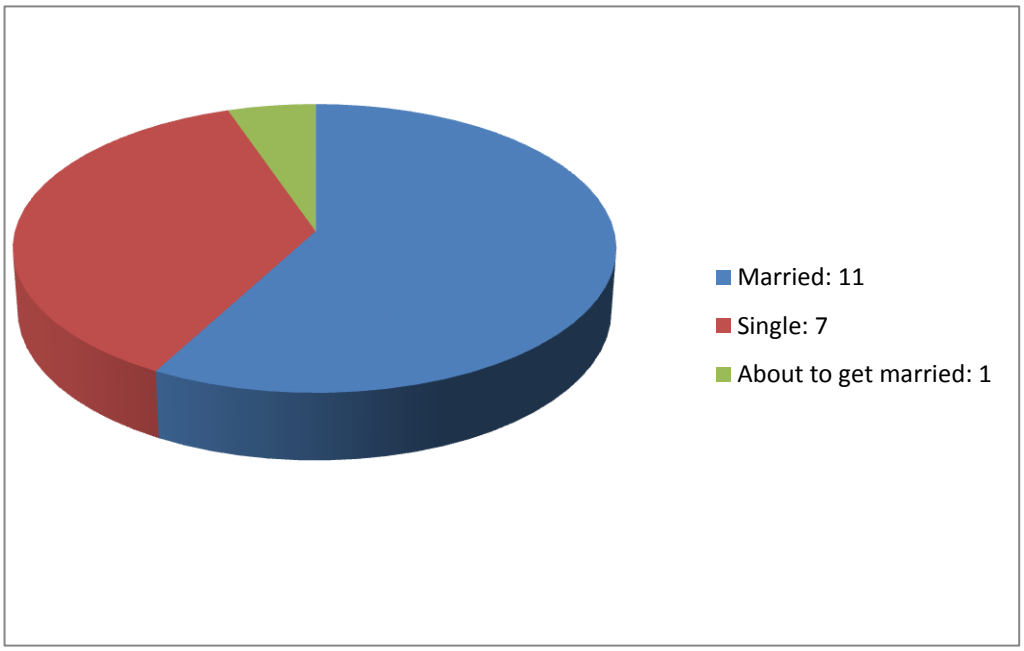

Figure 2: Marital status of interviewees

The interviews were semi-structured and resembled focus groups occasionally as they were mostly conducted at stores and shops where some of my informants work. The presence of friends, particularly my cousin's wife, helped to ease the tension and facilitated the smooth progress of interviews. A possible loophole is the fact that people might choose not to tell the truth. Most of my interviewees, however, were close friends living in a concentrated migrant enclave. They frequently exchanged their stories and did not have to hide facts in group talks. During the interview, I collected general demographic data including age, education, hometown, jobs, living places in the city, and the length of migratory life. I also asked such open-ended questions as: how do you select

a boyfriend? Why would you think he is the right one? Did you have any boyfriend before you migrated? What do your parents think of your chosen partner?

I recorded the interviews and then transcribed them into mandarin. As a former translator, I believe there was little information loss during the translation process. I coded the transcriptions, scored responses, and identified three types of *dagongmei* based on their marriage outcomes and aspirations. I sorted them into three groups: independent seekers, resigned negotiators, and tradition reformers. In the results section, I first present the three groups of women and their characteristics, and then answer why their marriage paths differ. I continue to explain on why and how parents interfere in their daughters' marriages. Towards the end, I briefly present the emergence of premarital sex among *dagongmei* and account for the persistence of marriage in China.

Results

SEARCHING FOR MY CUP OF TEA

Independent Seekers

Three of my interviewees have been successful independent seekers. They all met their husbands at their first factory jobs in their late teens and continued migrating together with their then boyfriends at other factories. They did not give in to parental objection, constituting a remarkable breakthrough in the marriage negotiations of rural women with their parents. The experiences of independent seekers over the bargaining process represent the highest level of agency among *dagongmei*, largely owing to their labor migration and economic independence.

One major characteristic of these women is their independent dating and marriage conclusion despite parental interference. No intermediate persons such as matchmakers were involved. This type of independence requires great determination and individual autonomy. Given the prevalent practice of family alliances in marriage, single daughters are socially and culturally expected to solicit their parents' consent over prospective mates. The least thing a daughter can do is to inform parents of their dating and upcoming marriage decisions. One independent seeker, however, seemed to leave behind her parents when she turned her urban date into marriage. Daling, a 34-year-old migrant from rural Lianyungang, Jiangsu, has been married to a local man, 10-years her elder, for 12 years. This relationship was not revealed to Daling's mother. Instead, Daling directly brought her boyfriend home, a move signifying engagement in rural areas. In addition to arriving home without notice and with a boyfriend in tow, Daling also hid her live-in

boyfriend's age from her mother. It was not until the couple obtained their marriage certificate that Daling's mother learned the groom's age. For Daling, however, her urban employment enabled her independence. In her own words, "I was just in love and would not listen to anybody's advice. There was nothing Mom could do."

A second characteristic is their relative long-distance marriages. While long-distance marriages are nothing new in cities, single rural women have been largely encouraged to marry locally for the purpose of family alliances. Two seekers married husbands from provinces other than their natal ones. Daling is from Jiangsu and married a local man. Xiaolin, 28, another seeker, comes from rural Shandong, and her husband is a migrant from Henan in the hinterland. Daling married up geographically but Xiaolin did exactly the opposite. A third seeker, Xiaoyi, 26 from suburb Linyi, married a man from a rural village in the same prefecture-level city. Both Xiaolin and Xiaoyi married downward in terms of geographical locations, casting doubt on the "spatial hypergamy" hypothesis by Fan and Huang (1998) among *dagongmei* who pursue free love.

Furthermore, independent seekers are characterized by their pursuit of free love irrespective of certain personal or familial backgrounds. For instance, Daling's husband is 10 years her senior. Although a local man, he is the third son in a poor-single parent family. In the case of Xiaolin, her husband is from a poor family in a poverty-stricken region in Henan. Plus, Xiaolin's husband has two younger brothers, another reason for her parents to frown in addition to geographic distance. My own observation in rural Shandong informs me that the ideal husband is the only son with one or two sisters. In this way, the couple can benefit from the son's entitlement treatment when his parents are

young but demand contribution from sisters when his parents age. The potential groom's parents are preferably in their forties so that they can contribute their labor to the new family. In Xiaolin's case, however, she plainly said "For me, I did not aim for money when I was looking for a spouse. I am satisfied as long as the guy has a good personality." My cousin-in-law, who co-participated in the interview, claimed that Xiaolin did not ask for any bridal price. This is quite uncommon as most rural marriages require high bridal prices. While this is not my focus, Xiaolin's defiant pursuit of love over material things, in addition to her negligence of parental control, showcases great autonomy over her life decisions. To conclude, labor migration enables these women to meet and pursue spouses of their own choosing and opens up spaces for greater bargaining power with their parents in rural areas.

Potential Independent Seekers

Although still single, two of my informants already demonstrate sufficient agency to choose their own spouses. Both women had had non-factory jobs during their migration. It should be noted that most factory jobs confine *dagongmei* to a social circle of other migrants. Non-factory jobs such as sales and waitresses, however, expose young women to a broader range of people. For instance, Xiaoxiao, 22, had worked for two years as a hairdresser. This service-oriented job aquatinted her with different types of rural and urban people and contributed to her maturity and sophistication. During the interview, she jokingly commented that she demands the three-big items, namely, money, housing, and a car as her criterion. While material conditions are always considered in

marriage negotiations, being able to articulate her needs is an indication of her greater agency.

A major feature of potential seekers is their urban dating relationships in the city free from parental intervention. They both dated local young men for a while but terminated their romantic relationships for reasons rather than parental objection. These short-lived urban romantic relationships show these women's autonomy in spouse searching in the city. Another characteristic that sets independent seekers apart from other single dagongmei is their practical expectation of marriage partners and their ambitious goal of urban settlement. Xiaofang, 25, had a specific set of conditions (*tiaojian*) that she would look for in a future husband. When I asked her to clarify, she put a strong emphasis on working capabilities and declared she did not care for appearance. This is quite different from other *dagongmei* who have requirements concerning the height, education, and family of potential spouses. Xiaofang's explanation resonates with some Bidayuh migrant women's pursuit of economic stability in marriage partners (Sim 2003). Sim notes that "a single woman knows that marriage to a man with a steady income is … her best escape route from a lifetime of poorly paid employment" (Sim 2003, p95). Xiaofang, however, made it clear that she can settle down in the city as long as she works hard and has her own career in the city.

Above all, potential seekers demonstrate evidence of making their own decisions concerning marriage partners. Their non-factory job status broadens their social network and their duration of stay in the city lessens parental expectation for them to return and marry. While potential seekers do not necessarily make romantic love their top priority,

their independent spouse searches originate from the empowerment gained through their labor migration. Wolf indicates that among Javanese factory women, most have chosen their own spouse (1992: 214). This is not the case with Chinese *dagongmei* as only a few in my small sample embarked upon independent searches for their husbands. Even among these women, some of their independent searches ended up in failure due to parental interference.

Resigned Negotiators

This subgroup of migrant women began dating in the city but was eventually discouraged by parents from pursuing the relationships of their own choosing. A defining characteristic of these women is that they forsake their own wishes in the presence of strong parental objection. All three women who can be labeled resigned negotiators, mentioned strong and persistent parental disapproval of the boyfriends that these women had met at factories. They also shared their unwillingness to break their relationships but expressed their eventual alignment with parental expectations.

Overall, these women's failed pursuit of romantic love, I argue, is highly representative of the ambivalence between individual agency and parental control. Their negotiations with rural families offer insights into how familial ties still play a major role in *dagongmei*'s major life-event decisions. For instance, all three women expressed their desires to continue their relationships but nonetheless mentioned that their parents objected for their own good. Their eventual reconciliation with parental wishes reflects an ingrained belief that all parents interfere to maximize the benefits of their daughters. Dahong, for instance, shared, "I didn't want to listen to my parents, but their intentions

were good after all. I didn't want to upset them." Hence, the conflict between individuals and families is downplayed and resolved through the practice of hypergamy for these women. While two of the resigned negotiators did not marry into economically developed areas, they found their spouses positively supported by their parents appealing in certain aspects. Xiaofei was satisfied with her husband's entrepreneurship and Xiaoji took pride in her spouse's technical college education.

WAITING FOR MY CUP OF TEA

Tradition Reformers

The third subgroup of migrant women fits more into the traditional view in the sense that they do not attempt to or do not find spouses in cities but willingly accept dates and marriages arranged by their rural families. They do not differ from resigned negotiators in significant ways. In fact, after abandoning their pursuit of free love in the city, resigned negotiators eventually become acquiescent to arranged dates and marriages, becoming part of tradition reformers.

This withdrawal from urban dating and resort to rural areas for marriage partners seems to indicate less autonomy, but I notice positive changes in their marriage decision-making process. Throughout the negotiation, *dagongmei* demand and make changes to traditional practices. This is why I term them tradition reformers. For instance, these women request some time to get to know their future spouses before getting engaged. They also learn from urban practices and regard their dating after rural engagement as having boyfriends rather than fiancées. Many times, they chat almost every day through

cell phones or the Internet, pursuing dating like their urban peers. Overall, there are three discernible changes in their marriage processes in comparison with traditional practices.

The first change is diversity of meeting places. Traditionally, dating arrangements were at street markets or at the young woman's, young man's, or the match-maker's home. The first meeting was normally accompanied by mothers and other close relatives, who all contributed to the final decision before engagement. Due to their physical presence in the city almost all year round, potential young couples have the option to meet in the city, although the go-between may be stationed in the rural area. One of my informants, Xiaoxia, 29, recalled that she first met her husband in Qingdao. The go-between, a middle-aged rural woman, helped them to exchange phone numbers and suggested that they contact each other for a meeting. Another young woman Xiaoyun, 24 years old, was currently chatting with a young man via the Internet. She said that the man was working in Singapore as an outsourced laborer and they had not officially met after the match-maker bridged the initial conversations.

Another noticeable change is the broadening in the composition of match makers. Traditionally, match-makers are semi-professionals in a village, relatives, or fellow villagers in the village of the bride or the groom's family. With labor migration to cities, colleagues and friends they met at work also lend a helping hand to *dagongmei* in setting up dating arrangements. Xiaoyan, 25, is now engaged to a young man in a nearby village and the match was recommended by her colleague, a young woman from the man's village. Similarly, Xiaoxia, also shares one of her love episodes set up by her colleague. During her intermittent breaks with her husband, the colleague introduced her to a self-

employed young man from Laiyang in another prefecture city. She was drawn to the man's entrepreneurship but withdrew when he demanded marriage in five months. This diversity of match-makers is new but useful for bridging matches. Friends and colleagues that serve as go-betweens are more trustworthy and more likely to focus on the person's characters rather than family background alone.

A third and perhaps most important change is the demand for time to get to know each other before getting engaged. Marriage aspirations tend to rise with migration because rural women start to adopt urban values in mate selection and may demand urban dating practices. Indeed, all tradition reformers who are engaged or married claimed that they have dated before marriage. In some cases, they started the date without getting engaged. Xiaoyan was introduced to seven or eight young men and all ended up in failure after chatting via phone or Internet. These trial dates were meant to find out whether a couple would match before parents could arrange an engagement. Xiaoju, 26, also mentioned that she had been introduced to up to 20 young men before the match with her husband. Having been married for less than six months, Xiaoju claimed that they dated for over a year. In some other cases, however, dating started only after their engagement in the rural area. Xiaoxia and her husband are a good example. They met in Qingdao, had an engagement ceremony back home, and then dated for a year before getting married.

Exceptions do occur, though. The only woman who fits into the very traditional type among my interviewees is Yadan, 22. She was married to a young man in her mom's natal village. The whole process from initiation to conclusion took only three months. Before her marriage, Yadan had worked in a few electronics factories in Tianjin for five

years and commented that she had few breaks because they had to work at most weekends. She also mentioned that in a workshop of over 100 workers, only four or five were male. There were few opportunities to mingle with young men. She conceded that she was not on board with the match at the very beginning but finally said yes because the man seemed nice and honest. This apparent lack of individual agency is attributed to combined social factors. In the next section, I explain why women's labor migration yields different levels of autonomy over their marriage decision-making processes. The social factors that I identify are rural family composition, urban job status, duration of stay in the city and others.

WHY DO *DAGONGMEI* END UP DIFFERENTLY IN THEIR DATING AND MARRIAGES?

Rural Family Composition

Rural family composition is a major and even decisive factor affecting the extent to which *dagongmei* exercise their own individual choices over parental interference. With a declining number of children since the implementation of the one-child policy, rural parents are concerned about their old-age support and thus highly motivated to marry their daughters locally. This is particularly true for two-daughter families with no sons. Two of the resigned negotiators are from families with two daughters and no son. Being one of the only two daughters, they are more obligated towards their rural families. For instance, Xiaoji, 25 years old, is the second daughter in her family. She dated a local man in Laixi, a town affiliated with Qingdao. After she confided her relationship to her parents, they launched a campaign to sabotage her relationship with the man. Although her former boyfriend also rallied a few friends to persuade her, she did not take him back.

Instead, she conceded to a match supported by her parents. When I asked her why she did not persist on her decision, she said:

> My elder sister is already settled in the city. As you know, she attended college and now has a college degree. My parents declared that they would not meddle with my sister's (marriage) affair but absolutely not mine. If I don't go back home, my parents would be left alone. There will be no one to take care of them. I don't want their lives to be hard, particularly when they age.

The elder one from a two-daughter family, in particular, seems to confront severe parental intervention if she attempts to date in the city. Dahong, 21, a resigned negotiator, is the older daughter at home. After she revealed to her parents her dating with a young man from rural Tai'an, Shandong, her parents immediately rejected and launched a joint campaign among relatives to force her to break the relationship. Unwillingly, she came to terms with her parents' order. In another example, Yadan, also from a family of only two daughters, mentioned that her elder sister fell in love with a young man at a factory but was dragged away by her parents to settle down in her village, contributing to an uxorilocal marriage. Her elder sister and now brother-in-law live with her parents.

Parents with three or more daughters, however, seem to exert less control over their daughter's marriage decisions, particularly if one or more daughters are already settled in nearby villages. Xiaolin, an independent seeker, comes from a family with three daughters. She attributed her success in marrying her factory lover to the social context and claimed that "isn't this the way things are nowadays? Parents always give in to their children's (spouse-selection) decisions." But it should be noted that her twin younger sisters were both working in their local town, a reason for her parents to interfere less.

Xiaofang, a second of three daughters in a family, offers another example. When I asked her why her parents did not set her up with men at home, she declared that her parents were liberal and understanding, but also mentioned that her elder sister, an ex-migrant, already headed home and got married.

It should be noted that parents with sons may not leave their hands-free either if their daughters try to marry someone afar. Quite a few of interviewees, tradition reformers, have elder or younger brothers. They still shared that their parents would object if they attempted to date someone at the city. With fewer children to depend upon, rural parents expect their daughters to marry nearby and to attend to their needs particularly in old age.

Single-parent or semi-single parent families offer alternative explanations on how *dagongmei* pursue marriages and negotiate their decisions with parents. For independent seekers, for instance, one major reason for their successes in turning relationships into marriages lies in the fact that their families constituted no major blocks to their pursuit of urban dating. Daling comes from a family consisting of a mother and two older brothers. Her father was in jail when she was young and was not released until after her marriage. In another example, Xiaoyi's mother died when she was 11. She was raised by her father together with an elder brother and an elder sister. But she did not get along well with her elder brother. She cited her motivation to get married was her constant quarrel with her brother. In these two cases, unconventional familial composition seems to shape young women's determination to pursue their own marriage goals. A possible explanation is the blurred power boundaries between daughters and their live-in parents. It should not be

inferred that single-parent or ruptured family structures always lead to independent marriages. Xiaoyan, a tradition reformer, comes from a single-mom family with four daughters. Her father died when she was only 5. All of her sisters were married and settled in nearby villages back home. She was already engaged to a young man from a nearby village, and expected to get married soon. A possible explanation for Xiaoyan's low autonomy in marriage negotiation with her mother is her five-year employment in the same factory. She had not changed her job since she started and claimed herself as the oldest employee at work.

To sum up, *dagongmei* are influenced by their rural family composition in their pursuit of dating and marriages, but family composition alone cannot explicate why these women end up differently in their marriages. Urban job status, for example, also affects the levels of autonomy that rural migrant women obtain during their urban employment.

Urban Job Status

Urban job status also affects the extent to which *dagongmei* pursue their own marriage mates in the presence of parental objection. For most *dagongmei*, their social space is largely confined to their jobs in clothing, electronics, or leather factories. They live in factory dormitories or rented cheap houses together with other female migrants. Their daily interactions are mostly with other migrants from their own places or elsewhere. To some extent, their urban factory job is ruralized in the sense of few urbanites at the workplace. For resigned negotiators, their failed negotiations with rural parents can be explained by their factory jobs. All three women had only factory jobs, although they had switched jobs a couple of times. In addition, all women that I term

tradition reformers have solely worked at factories. Many have switched their jobs, industries, and even worked at other cities for a while. For instance, Xiaonan, 20, had worked in Beijing before moving to Qingdao, but she was accompanied by villagers at her initial trips to both places and maintained close ties during work. I argue that their factory jobs, irrespective of industry and location, confine *dagongmei*'s social contacts within factories and limit their marriage aspirations, lessening their individual agency.

Non-factory jobs such as sales or small entrepreneurship, on the other hand, grants *dagongmei* more opportunities to socialize with local people. Working outside factories enlarges their social networks and allows them experience opportunities to settle in the city. One shared characteristic of the potential independent seekers is their previous or current non-factory urban jobs. Unlike other single interviewees, most of those who worked solely in factories, Xiaofang, used to have her own business selling cosmetics. She ran the business for two years and closed it only because of family problems. Xiaoxiao, another potential seeker, had been trained as a hair-dresser for two years. This service-oriented job aquatinted her with different types of people and shaped her sophistication and maturity that were indiscernible among her peers.

For proven independent seekers, continued evidence of their agency is their urban self-employment. Unlike some women who get married and return to rural areas, Daling turned herself into a legal urbanite and has her own business supplying construction materials. Her husband stopped working and stayed at home to take care of their son, when Daling managed to get a job as director at a Taiwanese company. The second seeker, Xiaolin is currently the owner of a clothing store that also sells fruit tea. Xiaoyi, a

third seeker, is a small entrepreneur who hires daily laborers to do craftsmanship in her processing point.

Duration of stay

Duration of stay in the city is another factor explaining the dynamics between daughters and their natal families. A prolonged absence from their rural families in some way symbolically makes migrant women "non-rural" and thus to a certain extent changes the way how their parents perceive marriage decisions. Having migrated for eight years, Xiaofang confesses that her parents are pressing her to marry but firmly states that her parents and villagers do not even bother to set her up with men in nearby villages. Xiaofang's economic independence seems to put her on equal par with her parents when it comes to decision.

> I was young when I started to migrate and my parents did not even think about it (marriage). Now I have been out for such a long time (eight years), people in my village just feel that I already have a boyfriend in the city. My parents want me to get married. I am no longer young but I need to wait for my "yuanfen[2]."

Others

Age is also an important factor explaining the extent to which *dagonmei*'s marriage choices are affected by their parents' wishes. The current legal age for women to get married in China is 20. For young single women at 20 and 21, however, most

[2] It should be noted that the discourse about *yuanfen* prevails among both *dagongmei* and their parents. *Yuanfen* is a Buddhist term about the binding force of men and women as lovers or friends. During my interviews, several single young women said they are waiting for their *yuanfen* to come and then get married. Even the married ones, Xiaoxia, for instance, claimed that *yuanfen* worked because she did not understand why she ended up with her husband. I argue that *yuanfen* is a cumulative effect of past events or stories that operates to influence people at either the conscious or subconscious level. Basically, my reading of *yuanfen* is socially constructed.

quickly denied any dating and said they had not put any thought into their marriages yet. As a daughter advances in age, however, marriage becomes imminent both for the daughter and her parents. Xiaoyan, 24, shared that she panicked and was afraid of becoming an old spinster when she was only 23. But if the daughter is not at home and has no intention of returning, however, parents seems less likely to intervene. For instance, Xiaofang, a potential seeker, is 25, a sensitive age for a rural woman on the marriage market. She made it clear that her parents are concerned about her marriage but would let her make her own decisions.

Another factor to be noted is education. In my search, education does not seem to affect how much *dagongmei* exert their agency. All my interviewees except two attended or finished junior high school. Of the two women, one finished a technical high school and the other finished primary school only. It is interesting that education does not seem to make a difference in women's autonomy in this research. But, it should be understood that a college education would mostly turn a rural woman into an urbanite and thus change the dynamics. Xiaoji's elder sister who finished college, for instance, is considered urban and free from her parents' intervention in her marriage. Given the length of this thesis, their experiences are not covered.

WHY NOT DATE AND MARRY A LOCAL MAN?

Local men in the city make preferred husbands for *dagongmei* in several ways, since most *dagongmei* express their desires to stay in the city. In my research site, all local people are urban residents. In addition to the urban *hukou* status, most local men, although residing in the peripheral of the city, have their shares of land and own their

houses. Local men also have more access to social resources in comparison to migrant men from other places. A shortcut for *dagongmei* to turn into settled urbanites is through marrying local men, but this is not the case. Out of 17 interviewees, three women had dated local men and only one such dating resulted in marriage.

The prevalent local-outsider dichotomy largely explains why dates with local men often end up in failure. For instance, Xiaofang, a potential seeker, dated a local man as introduced by one of their mutual friends. The relationship, however, did not last for a year. In my interview with her, Xiaofang reiterated that the match did not work out because of conflicting personalities but her use of the local-outsider dichotomy left room for speculation. Xiaofang conceded the prevalent animosity towards migrant women but commented:

> Our parents agreed the match at the very beginning. We broke up solely because of dramatic events caused by our differences in personalities. Although I just mentioned that local people tend to discriminate (outsiders), his family and mine are good. We do not have such feelings except that we cannot work out.

In my short visit at the site, I learnt that some local men specifically look for outsider women because they perceive these women as diligent, docile, and obedient. Xiaofang is fairly assertive and seems ambitious, thus not conforming to the stereotypical image that a local man would look for in an outside woman.

The local-outsider dichotomy also sheds light on why *dagongmei* do not necessarily consider local men as desirable marriage prospects. For them, local men are perceived to be "lazy" and "want to be taken care of." Given Xiaolin's wish to settle in

the city, I pressed her for why she did not think of marrying a local man. She vividly described the fate of a fellow migrant worker when she was only 20 or 21 years old. She used this suffering of another fellow migrant worker as her excuse to stay away from "local men" and to choose "free love."

> She married a local man but did not have an apartment (in the city). Her husband has a brother who married a local woman. Every Sunday, the brother and his wife came for dinner and she (the friend) has to busy herself in the kitchen. She sadly put it "they all said that I marry a local man; in fact I would have been better off if I marry a rural man." She is not as rich as her elder sister (who married locally). Every single time she visits her natal home, her sister has to give her money.

WHY AND HOW DO PARENTS INTERVENE?

Why Do Parents Object to Their Daughter's Dating in the City?

In my interviews with *dagongmei,* parental expectation and intervention is a major thread in their narratives. All my research subjects mentioned that their parents have certain leverage over prospective marriage partners. For single men, this is because parents finance the marriage; for single women, none of their parents stay out of the negotiation process but try to maximize the marriage outcomes of their daughters. Even the three independent seekers, Daling, Xiaolin, and Xiaoyi had to deal with their parents' initial and even continued dissatisfaction with their self-chosen husbands.

One chief reason for parental intervention in daughter's marriage is concern over old-age support. In China, people with rural *hukou* have not been included in social pension programs, and old people rely on their adult children, mostly men, for support. Without a son, parents expect their daughters to marry locally rather than let them marry

someone faraway and functionally lose their daughters. In my small sample, three *dagongmei* come from two-daughter only families. The parents of two of them, Dahong and Xiaoji, have successfully persuaded and even coerced them from choosing spouses on their own. The third already recruited a son-in-law to live with them, constituting the matrilocal residence. My research in a village with mixed kinships (as shown by different family names) shows that intravillage marriage is on the increase. Parents with marriageable daughters first cast their nets in the village and then start to look for young men from nearby villages. By marrying their daughters to someone who lives close by, they can rely on their daughters and in-laws in old age. Overall, rural parents are highly motivated to marry their daughters locally.

How Do Parents Exercise Their Influences?

Parents deploy several strategies to exert their influence upon their daughters. The most common excuse is the geographic distance between the two families. Parents fear that the distance would loosen family ties and eventually lead to the loss of a daughter. For instance, Xiaoji, 25 years old, shared her dating experience with a local man in Laixi, a town affiliated with Qingdao. Her parents immediately objected to the relationship. They claimed that it was too far away and would not be convenient to maintain future family relations. As a result, she agreed to a match supported by her parents. When I did the interview, she was heading home to get married. Her explanation for the withdrawal of free love is as follows:

> They set me up with young men from villages not far away. In terms of arranged dating, you know his family well. If you choose to find someone (a husband) on

> your own, you don't know much about his family. It is not safe for my future family. What would happen if we cannot work out?

A common technique for parents to stop their daughters from dating is to have relatives or other matchmakers set their daughters up on arranged dates as I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis. For instance, Xiaolin, an independent seeker, admitted that her mother told her about a prospective spouse, but she declined to meet the man. Another young woman, Xiaofei, a resigned negotiator, however, finally said yes to such a date. The major reason for her acquiesce to parental control was the fact that this prospective groom had a small business at home.

In addition, some parents use chronic illness, sickness, or even death as a tool to influence their daughters' dating and marriage decisions. For instance, Dahong, a failed negotiator, cited that her mother used her chronic coughing as a reason to force her to break up with her boyfriend. She did not want to upset her mother even though she wanted to continue her romantic relationship. Xiaoxia, a tradition reformer, who withdrew from a few arranged dates with imminent wedding prospects, finally accepted the proposal from her husband's family because her mother complained that her father died without seeing her get married.

Apart from directly intervening such as arranged dates and coercion, rural parents also influence their daughters implicitly. In rural China, I observed circulating narratives about dangerous men and the pretty women that these men pursue and then abandon in cities. This construction of outside men as the dangerous "other" plays a part in *dagongmei*'s attempts to retain their rural identity and not break their social relations with

parents. Xiaoyan, 25, recalled anecdotal stories about pregnant migrant women deserted by wealthy bosses passed on by her mother. She used such stories to justify her passivity and unwillingness to pursue someone at work.

In some cases, parental interference is subtle and not even recognized by *dagongmei.* Xiaoyun, a 24-year-old factory worker, first claimed that she is free to choose her own spouse in the larger social trend of free marriage. Having an elder brother, she indicated that her parents did not expect her for old-age support. When I asked her why not find someone at work, she immediately responded by "No. My parents won't agree. It is too far away." This contradictory answer vividly describes the limits to the freedom that female migrant workers confront. They are free to choose men who are not far from their natal homes or in some cases, whomever their parents first lay an eye on.

EARLY COHABITATION AND PREMARITAL SEX

A noticeable change in rural Shandong is the increase in immediate child births among young migrant couples shortly after their wedding ceremonies[3]. I also observed that some rural mothers specifically asked their daughters not to accommodate their fiancées in case these young men visited the city. These mothers feared that their daughters would lose their virginity and even get pregnant before marriage. This contrast between parental discipline and actual cohabitation in the city reflects another domain of individual agency and social constraints – women's sexuality.

[3] In China, a marriage is socially accepted only after a wedding ceremony. The legal registration of marriage may occur ahead of or after the ceremony.

With labor migration and physical separation from families, young women are more inclined to exercise their sexuality. As I noticed in my research, some women mentioned their cohabitation before marriage. Interestingly, all three women who acknowledged sex before marriage were married to the men who eventually became their husbands. None of the single women acknowledged the existence of any premarital sex by themselves, although most mentioned that cohabitation was commonplace among their coworkers in romantic relationships. This self-distance, I argue, shows the restricted acceptance of sexuality. One explanation for this restricted acceptance is the social meaning that virginity retains. A woman still feels obligated to keep her virginity and can justify her premarital sex by eventually marrying the man who took the virginity. Daling's story is a good case in point. She and her husband lived together within two weeks after they knew each other. She believed that the reason for their marriage is their premarital sex.

> He treated me well. We began to live together shortly after we met. It was about two weeks. You know, many other couples were living together, too. I did not understand about it (sex). I felt that he took my virginity and I could not look for a second man. I was just too young back then.

The popularity of cohabitation is explainable through peer influence. Xiaoju, 25 and newly married justified her early cohabitation with the man who became her husband by pointing to the phenomena that other women did the same. Similarly, Xiaoxia, who married her husband 5 years ago, gave the same reason for her decision to live together with her husband before marriage. It seems clear that premarital sex is acceptable and

shareable as long as it leads to marriage. In the next section, I explain why marriage remains persistent and universal in transitional Chinese society.

WHY IS MARRIAGE PERSISTENT

In China, marriage remains almost a universal expectation. All my informants expressed desires to get married. In addition to the strong parental expectation described above, peer influence also contributes to the prevalence of marriage aspirations. For instance, Ching Kwan Lee (1998) records the prevalent "relations with men" talk on the shop floor (Lee 1998, p146-147). Lee records that migrant women share and even take pride in their dating encounters. These conversations highlight the cultural and social forces that channel young men and women into dating and marriage. As Xiaoxia put it in our interviews, "you enter a factory and you find lots of girls have boyfriends. It seems fun. I should just get one, too."

Arranged dating and marriage are almost household topics in rural areas, particularly during holiday seasons when young migrants visit home. Parents are eager to set their daughters or sons up for match-making events. In some cases, matchmakers start to arrange meetings two or three months ahead. Parents in general consider their children's marriages an inescapable duty and feel relieved only after all their children are married. My conversations with rural parents show a competing trend for task completion (*wancheng renwu*).[4] Those who are able to marry their children earlier take pride in their

[4] This phrase literally means "task completion," but in rural China, it means that parents are able to finance their sons' marriage and marry their daughters off, forming their own families. To some extent, children's marriage (particularly sons) is also a major life event for parents, achieving higher social status.

capabilities and are believed to be capable (*youbenshi*), gaining certain prestige among their fellow villagers.

Given this social and cultural context both at workplace and at home, a migrant woman confronts mounting pressure, if she remains single for a long time. Xiaoxiao's words are quite representative.

> I used to think why I should look for someone when I am 21 or 22. But now I am 22, I start to think, gosh, I need to have a husband. This does not mean that I want to have one but it is because they all do. When people of my age start to have boyfriends or husbands but I don't, I get concerned what other people are saying and thinking about me. It is really about how other people think of me.

Lydia Kung (1983) notes the ambivalent attitudes towards marriage among Taiwanese factory women because they associate marriage with diminished freedom. I did not find such discourse in my study. Instead, many *dagongmei* conceive marriage as a primary means towards security and settlement. Almost all single women can list specific requirements for their future husbands. In their envisioning, their future grooms should be better than themselves in several aspects. Only two young women, Xiaohe, 21 and Xiaonan, 20, said they have not put any thought into marriage yet.

The institution of marriage seems deeply entrenched and does not allow any overt challenges. When I asked why marriage is necessary, one *dagongmei* simply says, "is it (marriage) the ways things always are and should be?" Her words reveal the social construction of marriage but also highlight its persistence. Marriage is not an individual option but a task to be accomplished. Failing to marry carries a social stigma. In this context, I argue that urban work far away from rural homes does not necessarily erode

marriage aspirations and pursuits. Instead, most *dagongmei* regard factory work as a stepping stone towards finding mates superior to themselves. Dahong, for instance, listed specific criteria for her future spouse – height, age, and financial status. According to her, she would have to meet her conditions to get married, but marriage itself is never a question.

Towards Gender Equality?

Marriage, as a contestable site for social interactions between children and parents, offers a window to examine how gender inequality plays out. As an institution, marriage predates family formation and shows how women become subordinated in the process of social reproduction. Marriage in China is still predominantly patrilocal and can thus be considered "the continuation of the patriarchal family" (Zhang 2010, p60). This means that a young woman physically moves to live with her husband and thus turns into an "outsider" to both her own natal and her husband's families. The patrilocal nature of marriage practices in China remains to this day, although some married couples migrate together to the city. In rural areas, women still join their husbands' households. They may then head out for labor migration together but their residence remains located in men's villages. In this vein, marriage channels women into the domestic sphere by labeling their role as wives.

A woman's consecutive roles as daughter and wife reveal her subordinate positions within households. As daughters, many *dagongmei* send money to their parents, assisting household finances or a sibling's (mostly a brother) education. After marriage, their role as wives pressures them to bear children. Xiaoju, a newlywed, vividly described the pressure she was under from parents at both sides to have a child. She emphasized motherhood as "an inescapable burden." For those who are mothers, marriage and motherhood that closely follows marriage forced them to quit their factory jobs to attend their children's daily needs and occasional sicknesses. In an attempt to combine motherhood and livelihood, many married women started their own small businesses in

the city, supplementing their husbands' income. For instance, both Xiaolin and Xiaoxia have their clothing stores but as they put it, "we are just trying to find something to do while taking care of our children. The business can hardly make ends meet."

Men and women have different roles in the marriage negotiation process, particularly in arranged marriage. My research in rural Shandong reveals a double standard for men and women. Villagers speak highly of young men who successfully find a wife from the outside and applaud them as highly capable. If a single woman brings a young man home, however, her parents frown and villagers often immediately gossip about her chastity and sexuality. This continued surveillance declines with continued migration but still perpetuates the subordination of women. This parental and even societal expectation of gender roles shape women's inferior status in the marriage market. An example is the increase in "bridal prices[5]" demanded by migrant women. Several studies connect this rise with the increasing value of women's labor (Zhang 2010). I tend to think of bridal prices in terms of exchange. A bride-to-be is somehow equated with the items and money she demands from the future groom. In this case, a woman is exchanged with material items. In some extreme cases, parents of the bride-to-be demand a handsome amount of cash to allow their daughters to step into the wedding car. Inevitably, women are objectified during this process.

Also, the traditional gender expectation of women's passivity is still manifested among my informants. Quite a few firmly denied pursuing potential love interests. Their

[5] Traditionally, a woman's family demands a handsome amount of money or some materials from a future grooms' family before marriage. The bridal price, in a way, resembles a price charged by the female family to exchange the young woman.

answers fit into the traditional expectation that women are asexual and wait for men to take initiatives. Indeed, a few women mentioned that some men find jobs in clothing or electronic factories specifically to look for girlfriends. When I asked about these men's successes, most women said these men's chances of getting girlfriends were high. *Dagongmei* working in gender-clustered occupations outside home, they believe, are lonely and yearn for to be cared for. For instance, both Xiaoxiao and Dahong contended that young women often fell prey to persistent young men. It is possible that some women find values in the men during constant social interactions. The only young woman who said that she would take the lead in finding a boyfriend is Xiaoxiao, the hairdresser. She shared that she would venture to ask a guy out for dinner or send messages via phone if he meets her criteria. My other informants such as Xiaohe[6] said she has not given it any thought yet and thus will make no attempt.

My interviews with men reveal another side of the story. I did my interviews with men specifically to understand how gender dynamics play out among factory workers at the workplace in cities. Both Daming, 27, and Xiaodian, 26, mentioned that women rarely take the initiative but do offer hints. Xiaodian shared his experience of being pursued at a sewing factory. A young woman at work had a crush on him and suggested she go with him during a holiday break. Startled as he was, he asked "what do you want to do at my home?" "I want to help you harvest crops," the girl joked. Still, he did not have enough courage to bring her home, because he was chiefly concerned with

[6] Xiaohe, 20 years old, moved to Qingdao together with her entire family. This lack of parental separation constrains her actions but not her desire. She is the only one among the single women to declare that she will not consider a man from rural areas.

maintaining social relations at the place of origin and migrating primarily for economic reasons. He also shared the subtle tricks deployed by women to date guys and asserted that it took great courage for a young woman to take the first step.

Although women gain certain negotiation powers over their spouse selection, their gender roles remain unchanged. Only one informant in my research mentioned gender equality during the interview to justify her labor migration shortly after marriage but then claimed that men and women are different anyway. Her understanding of gender differences emphasizes biology, but the missing point is that biological differences are deployed as excuses for social inequality (Stolcke 1981). Marriage, as a historically institutionalized form, continues to play an important role in assigning women to the domestic sphere and to undervalue their domestic labor. Women's increased participation in the labor market and informal economy is supplemental to their husbands who assume breadwinner roles.

Conclusion

Based on in-depth interviews with *dagongmei*, my study indicates that women's labor migration enables them to pursue major life decisions such as marriage. Some women embark upon a journey of independent pursuit; others are discouraged by their rural parents from pursuing their own spouses; still others demand changes to the traditional arranged marriages and turn these practices into "assisted arranged marriages." These different levels of autonomy gained by *dagongmei* in their marriage negotiations can be explained by their rural family composition, their urban job status, and their duration in the city. Interestingly, my research shows that education (less than college) does not seem to make a difference in these women's agency. This finding suggests the continued importance of *hukou* in the settlement of Chinese migrant women. As long as a woman is classified rural, her education does not seem to be related with her agency. Women's autonomy in life pursuits, instead, is better demonstrated by their non-factory jobs, suggesting the significant role of urban job status in shaping women's agency.

Despite *dagongmei*'s agency gained through economic independence, they are all confronted with strong parental interventions. In comparison with migrant women in Southeast Asian countries and regions, Chinese *dagongmei* face stronger parental interventions. In some Asian regions such as Singapore and Hong Kong, factory women commute daily between factories and homes (Lim 1983; Salaff 1995). Factory daughters in Indonesia also live close to their natal homes as factories are mostly in rural areas (Wolf 1992). Neither Chinese *dagongmei* nor Bidayuh women in Malaysia can afford to commute because of the distance between their job locations and the places of origin.

Based on her ethnographic study of first-generation female migrant workers, Sim (2003) argues that migrant Bidayuh women consider marriage as an option rather than a necessity, a belief that highlights reduced parental control (Sim 2003, p96-7). Her finding does not match with the Chinese case where parental expectation persists. Strong parental interference exists in China although *dagongmei* mostly come back home twice a year during the National Day holiday and the Chinese New Year whereas most Bidayuh women visit home once every month. In the Chinese context, infrequent visits do not translate into diminished parental control.

Several studies highlight the transience of *dagongmei* and contend that their migration terminates with marriage (Fan 2002; Jacka and Gaetano 2004). This may be true during the earlier phase of migration or in hinterland provinces. With the continued deepening of reform and trickling down of economic benefits, new trends start to emerge. Contrary to the dominant view that marriage terminates women's migration, all married women in my research continue to be on the move, although mostly with their husbands. Whether these women constitute the eventual settlers as Robert Kenneth (2002) depicts with his research in Shanghai remains to be seen. It should be noted that my interviewees all expressed their interest in purchasing an apartment in the city but candidly acknowledged that the price had been beyond their reach.

This study contributes to the literature of marriage migration. Contrary to most marriage migration studies, my research shows that migration precedes marriage. Marriage negotiation, in this context, is a window to examine how industrialization or modernity and their contribution to economic independence intersect with tradition as

represented by parental interventions. By situating the diversified paths of *dagongmei* in the large context of rapid social change, I find that these women are empowered by their urban employment but traditional ideology still functions to keep their roles in the domestic sphere. For instance, almost all *dagongmei* I interviewed worked in female-typed jobs, which can be considered as extension of their domestic labor. The three subgroups of *dagongmei*, struggling and surviving across the rural-urban divide, are all empowered by their urban jobs albeit at different levels. Yet, traditional gender ideology still functions to confine *dagongmei* into the domestic sphere. Most women remain passive in the entire process and their consecutive roles as daughters and wives remain unchallenged.

It should be noted that a fuller picture of the gender dynamics in the marriage negotiations across rural-urban China could not be gained without looking at the experiences of young migrant men, "the other half of the sky." A next step to identify the gendered impacts over the marriage decision-making processes would be to incorporate young migrant men and hear their stories of spouse choosing across the rural-urban divide. Due to the ungeneralizable nature of qualitative studies, a survey-based quantitative approach to this research would yield statistically significant findings. Also, a comparative study on undereducated migrant men and women, and their educated peers (those with college degrees) would reveal the role of education in shaping marriage trajectories in transitional China. Due to a lack of social resources, educated young rural-to-urban men and women also face challenges in their marriages and urban settlement.

Overall, examining young rural-to-urban women's and men's marriage negotiation experiences is useful for understanding individual agency within social structures.

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